Catwalk to Culture: how the fashion industry values art

Chin-Tao Wu

Social and economic intervention of arts education: 2.9 Private and professional sectors’ contributions to arts education

Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taiwan

chintao@sinica.edu.tw

‘We want Maison Hermès to be thoroughly absorbed into Japanese society’, so declared, in all seriousness, the spokesperson of Hermès Japan. He also quoted, with approval, Jean-Louis Dumas, chairman of Hermès Paris, when he said that the Maison Hermès branch in the most fashionable shopping district of Tokyo should have ‘as much art in it as it has air’. How and for what reasons can a Western high-couture house such as Hermès want to be ‘thoroughly absorbed into Japanese society’? And how can they possibly fill the Maison Hermès’ shop floors with art without it becoming nothing more than an elegant outlet catering for the company’s exclusive global consumers? Art and fashion might seem, on the face of it, strange bedfellows; but both are mutually attractive and neither averse to commerce. Indeed they have always had a flirtatious relationship, and this has become progressively more intimate since the 1980s when corporate intervention in contemporary art and cultural life reached its height.

This paper will first look at the nature and various forms of art practice sponsored and supported by global fashion houses such as Giorgio Armani and Hugo Boss. Secondly, it will examine in detail the involvement of fashion houses in the arts, and the implications that this has for art education, by discussing more specific examples
taken from companies such as Hermès or Louis Vuitton. Thirdly, it will aim to present a global perspective on the involvement of fashion houses in contemporary art and cultural life. Based, as it is, on numerous field trips to Asian and European cities, such as Tokyo, Seoul, Paris and Milan, over the last few years, and on interviews with the personalities most closely involved, this paper will present first-hand original research, in combination with an analysis of secondary written material, in an area that has not so far been charted by academics working on art education issues.